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SUBJECT: NICARAGUA: POLL GIVES ORTEGA FAVORABLE RATINGS,
OPTIMISM UNUSUALLY HIGH

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A CID-Gallup poll released on February 21 shows President Daniel Ortega enjoying a honeymoon, with high favorability ratings and optimism toward his presidency -- not only from his traditional base of support, but also among the general public. The poll also concludes that half the public holds a positive view of First Lady Rosario Murillo, whom a majority considers to be the most influential person in the Ortega government. While the poll indicates a majority believe the country is on the right path and is confident that Ortega will leave the country in better shape than his predecessor Enrique Bolanos, the findings also suggest that the high expectations for the Ortega presidency will be difficult to manage given the challenges the country is facing. Further, Nicaraguans customarily give their presidents favorable ratings at the start of their terms, but their popularity tends to wane within the first year if their performance is not up to expectations. End Summary

A Honeymoon Sweet

¶2. (SBU) According to a CID-Gallup study conducted February 6-11, President Daniel Ortega of the FSLN party has marked his first month in office with a 61 percent approval rating, a level nearly on par with popular former President Violeta Chamorro who beat Ortega as the opposition candidate in the 1990 elections. The poll reflects an overall optimism and euphoria toward the new Nicaraguan government (GON) and 57 percent of the population surveyed believe the future of the country under Ortega's leadership will improve. With expectations at an all-time high, not only among his traditional base but also among the general public, the challenge for Ortega will be maintaining the level of optimism and delivering on the promises he has made, particularly in the area of employment.

¶3. (SBU) Noting that a sense of "euphoria" among the public was to be expected following a successful election, CID-Gallup pollster Fred Denton nevertheless termed the level of overwhelming optimism "unusual" considering the actual situation of the country. Denton told DCM that, while not apparent in the survey data, he felt that much of this excess optimism was attributable to a "relief factor" by those who had feared the worst from the outset from an Ortega Government. The analysis of the survey results cautioned that Ortega's honeymoon bliss echoed that of President Bolanos, who also enjoyed a period of high popularity early in his presidency, but left office with mission

unaccomplished marks. The CID-Gallup sample was based on 1,239 adults (aged 16 and older) questioned in house-to-house interviews, and has a margin of error of 2.8.

Great Expectations: Jobs, Education, Health

14. (SBU) The main problem facing Nicaraguans is unemployment, asserted a majority of those polled, also one of the main shortcomings of the Bolanos administration and what ultimately led to his loss in popularity. When asked if given the chance to ask President Ortega for one thing personally and for their families, at least 53 percent of respondents cited work, better jobs with better pay, as tops on their wish list, along with a home, plot of land, or a loan to buy a house. Better quality of education, more schools, better healthcare and medicines also ranked among the high expectations. More people expect that Ortega will fulfill his campaign promises than not. While 52 percent agree strongly or moderately that he will follow through on his campaign promises, only 15 percent have no faith at all in his ability to deliver.

Uncertainties Remain

15. (SBU) Although a significant 45 percent of the population consulted believe that Ortega "has changed" and will follow a democratic path, a solid 43 percent are uncertain about the type of government he will create, while 12 percent of the sample consider him a communist who will "repeat the mistakes" of his past. Nevertheless, amid the doubts, an overwhelming 64 percent are convinced that his government, whatever shape it takes, will be an improvement over the one

President Bolanos left behind.

This assessment was, noted Denton, shared not only by traditional Sandinistas, but also by other political groups.

Centralizing Power and Broadening Nicaraguan Alliances

16. (SBU) The survey also revealed a sense of ambivalence among the Nicaraguan public about democracy, coupled with a disturbingly high comfort level with Ortega's move to centralize power. Only five percent of those polled named democracy and political stability as being among their top priorities under an Ortega rule, in contrast to the 46 percent who valued jobs as most important. One of the more striking findings is that 33 percent strongly approved of Ortega's move to centralize power of the executive-- to include the direct control over the military and police, joined by 27 percent who somewhat approve. In contrast, just 17 percent recorded strong disapproval of the centralization of executive power. President Ortega's move to establish alliances with Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, and Iran was backed by 59 percent of the sample. (Denton acknowledged, however, that CID-Gallup should have broken Iran out separately from the ALBA group to get a better sense of Nicaraguan feeling toward such a distant and "foreign" relationship.) An overwhelming 84 percent held a favorable view of the ALBA agreement.

17. (SBU) When asked about relations with the United States, 33 percent predicted that relations would improve but an equal number believed they would not change. There was variation based on party affiliation. More respondents who identified with the FSLN predicted better relations (47 percent), while the PLC and ALN were less optimistic, at 28 percent and 17 percent, respectively. Only eight percent of FSLN-affiliated respondents opined that relations with the United States would worsen under an Ortega government, while 29 percent of those identifying with the PLC and 24 percent of those identifying with the ALN held that relations would worsen.

¶8. (SBU) First Lady Rosario Murillo, who also serves as the government's Director of Communications and Citizenry, was considered the most influential person in Nicaragua by a majority of respondents. Named the most influential person by 47 percent of those polled, her influence on Ortega's decisionmaking was believed to be even higher. While half saw her influence over her husband as very good or somewhat good, a third regarded it as more or less good, and under a quarter viewed it as either bad or very bad. After Murillo, the second most influential person named was Bayardo Arce, a former Sandinista militant now serving as President Ortega's advisor, followed by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and Cardinal Obando y Bravo.

Montealegre Viewed Leader of Opposition, but Confidence in ALN as Party Less Promising

¶9. (SBU) When asked who was the most influential leader of the opposition, forty-four percent of the sample named Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) leader/former presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre. Ex-president Arnoldo Aleman, who is under house arrest for corruption and money laundering and ranking leader of the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), was next in line -- named by 24 percent of the respondents. Although the ALN as a party was seen as strong in terms of consolidation of power by 64 percent of the population, it has lost ground in terms of its overall popularity, losing nine points in five months, while the PLC lost eight points over the same period. The study also revealed that at the time of the survey, the situation of the FSLN was more favorable than that of the other parties, and with its recent six-point increase, was in its strongest position since 2001.

A total of 37 percent of the population now identifies with this political party, the poll concluded. (Which corresponds closely to the 38 percent of votes which Ortega and the FSLN garnered in the November 2006 elections.)

¶10. (SBU) Denton told us he was quite sure that the "euphoric bubble" would start to deflate in the months ahead, and he expects that CID-Gallup's next survey in August will provide a more accurate "reality check" and baseline of public perceptions regarding the new Ortega administration.

BRENNAN